

# IDENTIFYING OURSELVES IN THE INFORMATION AGE

By Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Goodspeed

**H**ow many times have you heard some intelligent and well-meaning Canadian say something like “I didn’t know Canada had a Navy,” or, “I didn’t know Canada fought in the Korean War?” Sadly, such appalling ignorance is an unflattering national characteristic; and while it may not be representative of every segment of Canadian society, it underscores a pervasive lack of awareness and understanding Canadians have about their military. In a healthy democracy, public acceptance and understanding are vital to the military’s motivation, balance and organizational vigour. Whether we are involved in fighting a war, peacekeeping or conducting peacetime training, Canadians must understand who their Forces are, what they do, how they operate and what their tax dollars are paying for. Nobody else can be expected to make this case for us. It is the Canadian Forces’ (CFs’) responsibility to ensure that Canadian citizens are informed, and in this respect our efforts have fallen a long way short of the mark. This paper proposes a remedy to these problems by using recruiting advertising as a vehicle to develop a much more powerful Forces’ ‘brand’.

In the present climate, any significant measures to address the issue of the Forces’ public relations will likely in the short term generate a degree of political apprehension about our motives. The greatest political fear of an improved military PR program would be that disgruntled individuals might try to use it as a platform for political advocacy. From the outset, any changes to CF PR policy must make it abundantly clear that partisan distortion of a legitimate promotional message would be severely dealt with as a disciplinary failing. Nonetheless, there are worlds of difference between an effective and legitimate communications policy and inappropriate political advocacy. Public relations must be factual and non-partisan. Legitimate PR must stress who the Forces are — what they do, how they do it and what they contribute to Canada. We can do this through the development of a solid recognizable brand. If our brand and our PR meet these criteria, it will reflect favourably on the managerial skill of the government. On the other hand, if in attempting to meet its legitimate mandate, the Forces produce insipid, intermittent and disjointed PR, they reflect no credit on either themselves or the government of the day. In this respect, the Forces have considerable latitude to improve upon existing PR programs without running into ethical or jurisdictional minefields. We can do this by making some fundamental changes to our recruiting promotion.

The most visible and arguably the most powerful form of PR available to the CF is recruiting advertising. Recruiting advertising does much more than simply bring recruits through the doors of recruiting centres. It is one of the primary windows through which Canadians view their military, and because of this it demands special attention.<sup>1</sup>

Recruiting in Canada has traditionally been grouped for administrative purposes with education and training.

Presumably the rationale for this traditional arrangement was that recruiting was closely linked to basic training, and in order to maintain a close link between the two functions they were administered together. By itself there was a certain logic to this arrangement. However, what this grouping has done over the years is divorce recruiting promotion almost entirely from the broader, strategic PR function. This practice has hurt us. Recruiting advertising is the most potent and widespread form of advertising the Forces have available, and by distancing it from the Public Affairs realm and focusing solely on the short term imperatives of specific recruiting programmes, we have consistently diluted or ignored important long term brand messaging to the larger society. Although recruiting, education and training have recently been split for administrative purposes, the ‘tactical’, campaign-specific approach to recruiting promotion persists.

Recruiting is a process that takes many years, and because of this it demands strategically focussed PR. For the majority, enlistment in the Forces is not an impulsive decision. It’s a process that usually takes a lengthy period of time, involves substantial thought and consideration, and frequently entails inputs from friends, family and teachers, none of whom are a part of the immediate target market. Recruiting has a long and involved ‘sales cycle’, and an individual’s motivation to join is profoundly influenced by much more than the particular advertisement that prompted him or her to walk in the door. Tying recruiting promotion into a centralized long term Public Affairs plan will result in more coordinated and effective external PR. But in addition to numerous external audiences, recruiting promotion has a powerful effect on serving members of the Forces. Recruiting promotion is one of the key ways that serving members of the Forces view a reflection of themselves. In this respect, if handled skilfully, it can be an important internal marketing tool that influences retention, satisfaction and morale. We have never sufficiently acknowledged this in our recruiting promotional efforts.

In an age where information is everywhere, it is vitally important to ensure that the Forces have ‘informational presence’. Informational presence can be defined as a critical mass of promotion before a target audience that allows for the recognition and development of a brand, and ensures that an organization is capable of reaching its promotional goals.<sup>2</sup> Informational presence is a precondition to getting buy-in or understanding from internal and external stakeholders. The Canadian Forces likely has informational presence — we have been good at that. What we do not have is a strong brand.

Effective promotion, whether it is targeted internally or externally, has to incorporate the concept of brand. In talking to many senior officers in the CF there is a sense that, for the Canadian Forces, brand is a slick and vaguely disreputable oversimplification of complex issues and noble values. It is often sniffed at as something that has no place

in a serious military. This kind of thinking is wrong. Brand is not ad agency fluff; it is not deceptive advertising, spin or flavour of the month hype. Brand is a hard-edged, real world concept that we have ignored for a long time. In its simplest form, brand is what people think of when they think about us and, if we don't ruthlessly manage our brand, others, by design or default, will manage it for us. Like it or not, the Forces have a brand. That brand, unfortunately, may not be a strong one, and it may have different meanings and implications to different segments of the Canadian population. Brands have to be clearly understood; they require painstaking, long term management and meticulous day-to-day execution. The planning and control of brand management is not something that can be farmed out or out-sourced. It is something we have to become good at and control ourselves. In brand management, you can contract out a given advertising programme or a specific public relations event, but you cannot get someone else to do your brand management and expect your brand to flourish over time.

There are those who quite rightly point to recent polls that indicate Canadians view their forces favourably. We should be careful in interpreting such data. As any successful politician knows, favourable highly generalized trends may indicate a thin, ephemeral misting of support that can evaporate quickly. A solid brand that builds long-term support and public confidence demands informed public understanding and trust. A series of generalized favourable impressions aren't sufficient over the long run to generate this understanding and trust. It seems that that most Canadians like their military in a friendly, non-descript sort of way. However, the level of public awareness of the Canadian Forces provides a reasonably accurate indication of the strength and quality of our brand. A strong, centralized strategic PR plan can be instrumental in building the kind of brand we need. A strong brand will also assist us in other important areas.

One characteristic of a good organizational brand is that it must reinforce and help define our ethos. The subject of ethos has for very sound reasons taken on tremendous prominence in the last half decade. Brand, in a military context, is a telegraphic means of expressing the organization's ethos. It should be what people think of when they think of you.<sup>3</sup> For decades the US Marines have paid enormous attention to their brand. "The few, the proud, the Marines" is a brilliantly powerful advertising slogan that builds their brand. It conjures a range of very specific qualities the Marines pride themselves on. The slogan is not the brand; it is a means of conveying brand awareness. Brand is a means of occupying

a certain positional niche in the mind of the customer. A strong brand, solidly positioned, weathers the years well. In a different era the US Marine Corps advertised, "We're looking for a few good men." Over the years their brand has maintained a consistency that is evocative of the organization's enduring strengths, as well as its aspirations. The Marine Corps' brand encapsulates their ethos from Bunker Hill to Khe Sanh and Kuwait. The Canadian Forces have a hard-won heritage that is the equal of any military force, and in devising our brand there is no need to invent superlatives to describe the organization. We owe it to those who went before us to ensure that the characteristics and ideals that forged our heritage are not lost because we refused or were incapable of promoting them using the tools of the Information Age.

If the Canadian Forces is to be successful in implementing any of the strategic objectives laid out for it in the 2020 series of documents, as an essential pre-condition it must radically overhaul its public affairs and communications philosophy and strategy. The initial years of the Information Age have been a time of simmering crisis and angst for the Canadian Forces. Weathering that crisis and emerging from it stronger and more robust will require that every member of our team understands who we are and what we stand for. It is not too much to suggest that a CF brand should evoke images of an elite team: committed, professional and steadfast men and women who are mentally and physically prepared to overcome hardship and danger. Such a brand must serve as a measuring stick and a beacon for every member and every organization within the Forces. An effective brand should not be dependant on size, equipment or current tasking; however, it must be something that inspires, motivates and guides each of us. It has to be one that has an enduring significance and evokes to our members, as well as all Canadians, both our character and our expectations. We have some work to do to get there.

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### NOTES

1. Strategic PR will also assume increased importance in the next few years because, as demographic trends indicate, our recruiting crisis is likely to persist long into the future.
2. Promotion is an umbrella concept consisting of paid advertising and un-paid publicity. Developing these subjects is beyond the scope of this paper.
3. "There's no life like it" was a popular and instantly recognizable slogan, and on a tactical level it worked well. Unfortunately, this PR effort was entirely tactical in nature, and the ideals and images it promoted did nothing to convey the Forces' true image and the organization's value to Canadians.